Coalition Governance and Foreign Policy Decision Making

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Abstract

The paper explores processes of coalition governance in foreign policy. Specifically, it argues that such processes are being shaped by two interrelated dimensions of coalition set-ups: first, the allocation of the foreign ministry to the senior or a junior coalition partner; second, the degree of policy discretion which is delegated to that ministry. Bringing these two dimensions together, the paper distinguishes four types of coalition arrangements for the making of foreign policy which are expected to have predictable implications for the process of foreign policy making and ultimately for the foreign policy outputs and quality of multiparty coalitions.

Keywords

coalition governance; foreign policy; decision making; portfolio allocation; policy discretion

Existing research on coalition foreign policy has focused more on the foreign policy outputs of coalition governments than on the process of foreign policy decision making inside coalitions (Kaarbo and Beasley, 2008). In particular, early scholarship in the field has for the most part assumed a dichotomy between single-party and coalition governments and that coalition foreign policy-making exhibits certain fixed characteristics (see also the contribution to this symposium by Oktay and Beasley). What previous works have largely

failed to acknowledge is that coalition governments may organise differently for the making of foreign policy. Different processes of foreign policy making in coalition governments, in turn, should be expected to have a differential impact on the foreign policy outputs of coalitions.

This expectation links in with long-established findings in comparative research on cabinet government that the distinction between single-party and coalition cabinets has less impact on many aspects of government decision-making than the differences that exist between different configurations of coalition government (Frognier, 1993). Opening up the 'black box' of coalition governance in foreign affairs, therefore, promises more fine-grained insights into the drivers and characteristics of coalition foreign policy. Since executives tend to have a freer hand in foreign policy than in public policy, which is at the focus of most comparative politics research into coalition governance, understanding intra-coalition dynamics of policy-making is arguably even more relevant in foreign affairs.

Along these lines, the objective of the article is to provide conceptual starting points for a research agenda in coalition foreign policy that puts the *process* of foreign policy making in coalition governments centre stage (Kaarbo, 2008) and that contributes to our understanding of coalition governance more generally which research into the different phases of the coalition life-cycle has often neglected (Müller and Strøm, 2000). Such an agenda also promises to shed new light on normative debates about the promise and problems of coalition government and the quality of coalition foreign policy.

Specifically, the article suggests that processes of coalition governance in foreign policy are being shaped by two interrelated dimensions of coalition set-ups. The first dimension is about

which coalition partner is allocated the foreign ministry, in particular whether the ministry goes to the senior coalition partner or to a junior partner. The second dimension distinguishes between coalition governments in which foreign policy making is marked by significant policy discretion of the foreign minister and coalitions which put greater emphasis on centralised control mechanisms in foreign policy. Depending on the classification of coalition governments on these two dimensions, the foreign policy impact of coalition politics should be different.

The article will first lay out the two dimensions of coalition configurations in foreign policy. Second, it will move on to discuss the implications of different types of coalition foreign policy making for the foreign policy outputs of coalitions. Third, the discussion will zoom in specifically on the links between the process of foreign policy making in coalition governments and the quality of coalition foreign policy. The article concludes with identifying promising avenues for further research into coalition governance in foreign policy. What should be noted, moreover, is that the theoretical argument proposed in this article has been largely developed from the experience with coalition governments in established parliamentary democracies in Western Europe. It will be worth exploring whether and to what extent our argument travels to coalition politics in non-Western contexts, in particular in the Global South (see also the contribution to this symposium by Nicolas Blarel and Niels van Willigen).

COALITION ARRANGEMENTS FOR FOREIGN POLICY

By way of mapping different coalition configurations for the making of foreign policy, the consideration of two interrelated dimensions is critical. First, which coalition partner, the senior partner or a junior partner, holds the foreign ministry? Second, how much policy discretion does holding this ministry bring?

The first key parameter of coalition sets-ups for foreign policy is the allocation of departments in the foreign policy executive (Hill, 1993) between the coalition partners (Hagan, 1993). Portfolio allocation is central to coalition formation since the control of government departments is the most immediate payoff for political parties from joining a coalition government (Browne and Franklin, 1973). While office-seeking parties covet cabinet portfolios intrinsically for the prestige and opportunity for patronage they bring, policy-seeking parties instrumentally value ministries as a means to shape government policy (Laver and Schofield, 1990; Druckman and Warwick, 2005). The negotiations between prospective coalition partners about the distribution of portfolios can usefully be understood as a two-stage process (see Budge and Keman, 1990). At the first stage, each partner lays claim to certain ministries. At the second stage, parties resolve competing claims by trading ministries and negotiate a weighted distribution of portfolios that is proportionate to the share of legislative seats each of them brings to the table. In practice, the two stages are intertwined in that parties will formulate their portfolio claims in anticipation of what they can realistically hope to get in view of their relative size and the portfolio preferences of their coalition partners.

By far the most significant department in the foreign policy executive is the foreign ministry, which is the key source of diplomatic expertise within government and generally the lead department in foreign affairs. This ministry is also among the most highly considered prizes

of the coalition formation game and ranks as one of the most senior portfolios in any government (Laver and Schofield, 1990). As a case in point, respondents to a large-scale expert survey put the foreign ministry down as the second most important department in 21 out of 24 Western democracies, behind the ministry of finance. The foreign ministry was among the top three departments in all countries under study and always the highest-ranked department within the foreign policy executive, ahead of portfolios such as defence, trade or international development (Laver and Hunt, 1992). A more recent expert survey in 14 Western European countries found that the foreign office was on average the third most salient portfolio, behind the Prime Ministership and the ministry of finance (Druckman and Warwick, 2005). Accordingly, the foreign ministry is seen as one of only a small subset of portfolios which are salient enough to increase the public visibility of the party in charge and to affect its electoral prospects (Bueno de Mesquita, 1979). Coalition partners will therefore often have an eye on the foreign ministry when they negotiate the allocation of portfolios.

What is more, which coalition party leads the foreign ministry is significant for the process of coalition foreign policy making. Specifically, the decision-making authority and formal jurisdiction over foreign policy as well as the bureaucratic resources and expertise that come with the department give the party in charge of the foreign ministry important agenda setting powers and informational advantages (Laver and Shepsle, 1996). The party which holds the foreign ministry should thus be in a privileged position to play a proactive role in shaping and initiating processes of coalition foreign policy making. Also, this party is likely to attain a high public profile in foreign policy and to have a strong political incentive to take the lead in coalition foreign policy making and to develop a reputation for issue ownership in the field (Petrocik, 1996).

At the same time, the very fact that a party has come to lead the foreign ministry will often indicate that it takes a particular interest in foreign affairs. Policy saliency theory suggests that the qualitative allocation of cabinet portfolios is driven by the relative salience coalition partners attribute to different policy dimensions (Laver and Hunt, 1992). This is because parties are interested, either intrinsically or instrumentally with a view towards their electoral prospects, to control coalition policy on the policy fields which they have emphasised most in their party platforms and which they have therefore become linked with in the public mind. At the first stage of coalition formation, parties will claim departments which have authority over the policy areas they consider most important relative to other policy areas. At the second stage, they will trade off portfolios on lower-salience policy dimensions against portfolios dealing with policies that are of higher salience to them. The foreign ministry should therefore go the coalition partner which attaches the greatest weight to foreign policy (Bäck *et al*, 2011).

The party in charge of the foreign ministry can thus be expected to have both certain means and the political will to take a leading role in coalition foreign making. What is of particular significance, in this context, is whether the foreign ministry is held by the senior coalition partner, i.e., the party which fills the office of Prime Minister, or by a junior coalition partner which has fewer seats in parliament than the senior partner. First, control over the foreign ministry has been identified as one possible pathway for ideologically committed junior coalition partners to 'hijack' coalition foreign policy and push it into a more 'extreme' (i.e., more aggressive or more peaceful) direction (Kaarbo, 1996; Beasley and Kaarbo, 2014). Second, coalitions in which the foreign ministry and the Prime Minister's office are held by different parties should display greater scope for intra-coalition conflict in foreign policy making than coalitions in which both positions are controlled by the senior partner. Moving

beyond the foreign ministry, the same logic suggests that foreign policy making is more conflictual in coalitions which have allocated the departments in the foreign policy executive to different parties than in coalitions in which these departments are held by the same coalition partner.

Apart from the distribution of relevant ministries between the coalition partners, the second parameter of coalition foreign policy making is the extent of policy discretion which holding such departments brings. Given its pre-eminent position in the foreign policy executive, the focus is again on the foreign ministry. The key divide on this second dimension of coalition arrangements is between coalitions which are marked by ministerial government in foreign policy and those which give greater room to centralised control mechanisms in this field.

At one end of the continuum, coalition governance rests on decentralised authority structures leaving individual ministries with large policy discretion. Under such an arrangement, coalition partners agree at the coalition formation stage to delegate policy-making authority within particular jurisdictions to the party in charge of the relevant portfolios. Cabinet ministers, including the foreign minister, can thus be understood as 'policy dictators' who have the capacity within their field of competence to tie coalition policy to their own and their party's ideal points (Laver and Shepsle, 1996). Along these lines, the foreign policy of coalitions which display strong patterns of ministerial government should be driven first and foremost by the preferences and priorities of the party holding the foreign ministry.

In contrast, coalition partners may opt for arrangements of coalition governance which put greater limits to the policy-making discretion of individual ministries to ensure that policy across jurisdictions reflect the preferences of all parties in the coalition (Hallerberg and von

Hagen, 1997). To this purpose, coalition governments can rely on a range of ex ante and ex post control mechanisms which allow coalition partners to keep tabs on each other. Chief among these mechanisms are binding coalition agreements (Timmermans, 2006; Moury, 2010); divided portfolios in which one or more junior ministers come from a different coalition partner than the cabinet minister (Thies, 2001; Verzichelli, 2008); the shadowing of departments by parliamentary committees which are chaired by other coalition partners than the party holding the respective ministry (Martin and Vanberg, 2004; Carroll and Cox, 2012); as well as high-level coalition committees and cross-departmental policy making bodies in which all coalition partners are equally represented (Kaarbo, 1996). Also, the policy discretion of the foreign ministry may be constrained by the powers and competences of the Prime Minister in foreign affairs. In any case, the foreign policy of coalition governments which are marked by strong intra-coalition checks and balances in foreign affairs should reflect not so much the ideal points of single coalition parties as compromises between the coalition partners and thus resemble patterns of cabinet government.

What is important to note, moreover, is that the two dimensions of coalition arrangements are interrelated. Specifically, the weight attached to the foreign ministry in the portfolio allocation process will partly depend on the discretion and independent authority over foreign policy that come with it. The more this discretion and authority can be constrained by other coalition partners, the less parties will value the department at the coalition formation stage (Bäck *et al*, 2011). One implication of this is that senior coalition partners will more likely be prepared to leave the foreign ministry to a junior partner, the closer the policy-making authority of this portfolio is being circumscribed. Indeed, strong coalition mechanisms for controlling and monitoring the foreign ministry may well be a precondition for the senior partner to agree to putting a junior partner in charge of the department. In contrast, if holding

the foreign ministry does involve far-reaching powers to steer coalition foreign policy, the senior coalition partner should be more likely to bring to bear its relative size in the coalition formation game to secure the portfolio for itself.

TYPES OF COALITION ARRANGEMENTS AND THE MAKING OF COALITION FOREIGN POLICY

Bringing the two dimensions of coalition set-ups together yields four types of coalition arrangements for the making of foreign policy. These types differ as to which coalition partner – the senior partner or a junior partner – has been allocated the foreign ministry and regarding the extent of policy discretion this ministry has (see Table 1). Each of the types, moreover, should come with predictable implications for the process of coalition foreign policy making and ultimately for the foreign policy outputs of coalition governments.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The first type of coalition arrangements has a senior partner-led foreign ministry and is marked by patterns of ministerial government. Coalition foreign policy making will be dominated by the senior partner, with little or no meaningful junior partner influence. Under such an arrangement, coalition foreign policy should display no significant differences compared to a counterfactual single party government of the senior partner. In particular, the decision-making process in this type of coalition should not systematically be more conflictual or prone to deadlock (Hagan *et al*, 2001) than in single-party governments. Since the authority to make foreign policy is concentrated in the senior partner, moreover, the

responsibility for foreign policy decisions can be clearly attributed so that this type of coalition government will not add to any diffusion of accountability. Also, there will be little scope for junior partners to use positions of authority in the foreign policy executive to 'hijack' coalition foreign policy. Therefore, two causal mechanisms – the diffusion and the 'hijacking' arguments – which are expected to drive coalitions to more extreme foreign policies (Beasley and Kaarbo, 2014) should not be effective in this type of arrangement.

The second type, in turn, is also characterised by ministerial government but has a junior partner in charge of the foreign ministry. This arrangement is often implicitly or explicitly assumed in existing research on coalition foreign policy and supports the expectation of more extreme foreign policies of coalition governments. Coalition foreign policy will reflect, in particular, the preferences and priorities of the junior partner which can use its position at the top of the foreign office to effectively control and shape the foreign policy making process in the coalition. While this set-up should not be more vulnerable to deadlock than the first type, it opens up opportunities for committed junior partners to 'hijack' coalition foreign policy and to push it towards the extremes. What is more, the allocation of the foreign ministry to a junior partner suggests that this party takes a particular interest in foreign affairs and will likely employ its control of the ministry to develop a high public profile in this field. Specifically, junior partners should be expected to invest a substantial part of its limited political resources to develop a reputation in the public mind of 'owning' coalition foreign policy and of cultivating a profile as a distinct and influential political force in the coalition. A case in point for these patterns is the recent coalition government in Germany (2009–2013) between the Christian Democrats and their Liberal junior partner, in which the junior partner held the foreign ministry and was subsequently able to capture coalition foreign policy on issues such as the demand for a withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Germany or the

German abstention on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya in March 2011 (Oppermann and Brummer, 2014).

Moving on to the third type, this coalition arrangement combines senior partner control of the foreign ministry with powerful checks and balances of junior coalition partners. Specifically, junior partners have available strong mechanisms to control and constrain the policy discretion of the senior partner in charge of the ministry. In this set-up, coalition foreign policy making is marked by the need to balance potentially competing interests of different coalition partners and therefore tends to be more conflictual than in the first two types. To the extent that junior partners have independent veto powers over foreign policy, this arrangement should also be more susceptible to deadlock (Hagan *et al*, 2001). At the same time, the influence of junior partners should not work towards more extreme and high-commitment foreign policies but lead to more moderate and low-commitment coalition foreign policy. Rather than 'hijacking' coalition foreign policy, the role of junior partners in foreign policy making is more behind the scenes and primarily works to restrict the ability of the senior partner to implement its foreign policy agenda in full. Junior partners will also keep a lower profile in foreign affairs and will be less likely to put foreign policy at the centre of its public political profile. An exemplar case for this pattern is the 2010–2015 Conservatives-Liberal Democrats coalition government in the UK, in which the Liberal Democrats as the junior coalition partner did not hold the foreign ministry (or any other department in the foreign policy executive) but could rely on multiple mechanisms to 'coalitionise' foreign policy making, in particular during the early years of the coalition. These mechanisms were indeed instrumental in enabling the Liberal Democrats to prevent their senior party from taking more extreme foreign policy choices on issues such as the renewal of the British nuclear deterrent or European policy (Oppermann and Brummer, 2014).

Finally, the fourth type of coalition set-up has a junior coalition partner in charge of the foreign ministry as well as strong mechanisms for cabinet government. Under this arrangement, the ability of the junior partner to use its control of the foreign ministry to 'hijack' coalition foreign policy and to drive the foreign policy agenda of the coalition will be severely constrained by the senior partner. Given its position as the largest coalition party and as the party holding the Prime Ministership, the senior partner will be particularly powerful in making use of existing control mechanisms to reign in the junior partner holding the foreign ministry. In consequence, there will likely be a greater mismatch between leading the foreign ministry and being able to shape coalition foreign policy in practice than under the other types of coalition set-ups. This may become a source of junior partner disaffection and open up a significant potential for intra-coalition conflict in foreign policy making. Moreover, while the senior coalition partner is very powerful in constraining the foreign policy leeway of the junior partner at the head of the foreign ministry, it cannot use the resources of the ministry to proactively shape and lead coalition foreign policy itself. The fourth type of coalition arrangement will thus be particularly susceptible to deadlock.

The potential of the suggested typology in guiding comparative empirical research is fourfold. First, it can be used to categorise current and historical cases of coalition governments and advance our understanding of which coalition arrangements for making foreign policy are most common. Specifically, this promises to uncover within-country and cross-country patterns in coalition set-ups. To that purpose, the typology can help map coalition governments both in European parliamentary democracies and beyond, including in the Global South. Second, the typology can further research into the allocation of foreign ministries in coalition governments. Specifically, it can be used to identify critical cases for

exploring possible trade-offs between the allocation of the foreign ministry and its policy discretion at the coalition formation stage. Third, the typology offers a starting point for research to establish if and to what extent the hypothesised implications of the different types of coalition arrangements for processes of coalition foreign policy making hold empirically. Not least, such research promises to yield more differentiated insights into the foreign policy outputs of coalition governments. Fourth and most broadly, the typology might encourage studies to explore if the different types of coalition arrangements are specific to foreign policy or if they are applicable to other portfolios as well. Such research would make a welcome contribution to bringing together scholarship on coalition governance in public and foreign policy.

THE PROBLEMS AND PROMISE OF FOREIGN POLICY MAKING IN COALITION GOVERNMENTS

When compared to single party governments, coalition governments are often associated with negative processes and outcomes that hamper the quality of governance. Coalition governments are depicted as arrangements in which political deadlock, conflict, hijacking by junior parties (Kaarbo 1996), inefficiency (Bejar, Mukherjee and Moore, 2011) and low accountability (Strøm, Müller and Smith, 2010; Kisangani and Pickering, 2011) are more common than in single party governments. For example, Bejar, Mukherjee and Moore (2011) found that due to their shorter duration, coalition governments are more costly than single-party governments and therefore less efficient. Also, accountability is said to be lower in coalition governments, because monitoring and controlling multiparty cabinets is more difficult for the parliamentary majority than in case of single party cabinets (Strøm, Müller and Smith, 2010).

With a view to foreign policy, however, such general assessments about coalition government need to be qualified. While Kaarbo's (2012) in-depth case studies of coalition foreign policy in the Netherlands, Turkey and Japan do indeed display many features of poor decision-making often associated with coalition governments, they also point to numerous cases of good, creative and decisive governance, for example regarding the prevention of premature closure in scrutinising alternative courses of action. Specifically, the typology of coalition arrangements developed above would suggest that the risks and negative characteristics often attributed to coalition foreign policy depend on the type of coalition in question.

To start with, foreign policy making in coalition governments resembling the first type should not be considered problematic, since there is no significant difference to single party governments when it comes to the process of foreign policy making. The second, third and fourth types, in contrast, are problematic in terms of possible deadlock or hijacking. However, these risks differ depending on the particular type of coalition arrangement. In the second type the main concern is hijacking, whereas the third and in particular the fourth type are primarily vulnerable to deadlock.

Discussing these types of coalition arrangements only in terms of risk, however, does not do justice to the positive characteristics of coalition government. For example, Huber and Powell (1994) conclude that the congruence between citizens (voters) and policy makers is often higher in coalition governments than in single-party governments. Also, coalitions are associated with the prevention of societal conflict. This is well illustrated by Lijphart's (1977) concepts of consociational democracy and consensus democracy (1999). Deeply divided societies can still have a stable political regime if the political elites representing the different

segments of society are prepared to cooperate. Consociationalist theory posits that such cooperation is facilitated by grand, inclusive, depoliticised and egalitarian coalitions (Andeweg, 2008). Not least, the promise of coalition governments is that they are more representative and do better in taking into account a more diverse range of views than single-party governments (Kaarbo, 2012). There is a trade-off between effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and congruence on the one hand and representativeness on the other. A coalition government with a junior party holding the ministry of foreign affairs, or a coalition government with a senior party in charge of foreign policy, but with little policy discretion, might be more conflictual, but at the same time better at representing different groups within society. More representative government might be less effective and/or less efficient, but at the same time more legitimate.

In addition to these positive characteristics, it is wrong to assume that coalition governments cannot solve problems like hijacking or deadlock in foreign policy. Coalition governments are often embedded in institutional arrangements that prevent and mitigate conflict between the coalition partners. Coalition agreements, for example, are useful tools to prevent conflict between coalition partners, because they are 'pre-commitments, by which the negotiating parties 'bind themselves to the mast'' (Müller and Strøm, 2008). Coalitions also have conflict management mechanisms at their disposal. Timmermans and Moury (2006) show that at least in the case of recent Dutch and Belgium coalition governments, conflict management mechanisms were institutionalised and explain the stability of coalition governments in both countries.

Arguably, successful conflict management and achieving consensus are more likely in foreign policy making processes than in domestic policy making. This is because the

particular domain of foreign policy adds to the coherence of coalition politics. For example, neorealist theorising would suggest that international systemic effects discipline coalition governments, because domestic issues and party political considerations are secondary to exogenous circumstances in foreign policy making. In this view, conflict between coalition partners is prevented or mitigated, because national security considerations stimulate the coalition government to set aside intra-coalitional differences. Moravcsik (1997) gives similar importance to exogenous factors (but from a liberal point of view) when he argues that the interdependence of state preferences constrains the foreign policy of any government.

At the other side of the spectrum, social constructivists and role theorists emphasise the importance of culture and identity in explaining foreign policy making (Holsti, 1970; Duffield, 1998; Hopf, 2002). Exogenous factors and role conceptions do not make party politics within a coalition irrelevant, but they help preventing deadlock and conflict. A strong national role conception can stimulate consensus in spite of an ideologically segmented coalition government.

Finally, intra-coalition consensus in foreign policy making may simply result from the survival instincts of self-interested coalition governments. For example, there might be strong domestic political pressures to 'do something' in reaction to an international humanitarian crisis. Such pressures can facilitate unity between the coalition partners, irrespective of their party political differences, if the government wants to prevent being 'punished' by the electorate (Pohl, van Willigen and van Vonno, 2015). It is fair to conclude, therefore, that coalition governments are after all "not as bad as they are often portrayed" (Kaarbo, 2012: 244) in making foreign policy.

RESEARCH AGENDA

The above discussion points to several avenues for future research. Regarding portfolio allocation, virtually no work has specifically investigated the key drivers behind the allocation of foreign ministries at the coalition formation stage. Thus, future research should develop hypotheses to explain under which conditions the foreign ministry is likely go to a senior or junior coalition partner. As far as the making of foreign policy is concerned, one could look into the extent, and associated mechanisms, to which a junior party who is in charge of the foreign ministry is able to circumvent the constraints imposed by the senior coalition party on the discretion and independence of that ministry. Relatedly, additional research is required probing into the mechanisms employed by coalition governments to overcome deadlock or hijacking by junior parties in foreign policy making. More attention needs also to be put on how different coalition arrangements affect other intra-coalition dynamics in foreign policy decision-making, such as logrolling or diffusing accountability (see also the contribution to this symposium by Oktay and Beasley).

Regarding the different types of coalition arrangements in foreign policy, one could explore, for instance, whether and how factionalism within the senior party can be exploited by junior parties. For example, internal divisions within senior parties leading the foreign ministry might enable junior parties to constrain their senior partners even under conditions of ministerial government. This would render type 1 more similar to type 3 and thus increase the likelihood of deadlock under the first type of coalition arrangements. Finally, while we have argued above that national role conceptions could possibly exert a mitigating effect on the emergence of intra-coalition conflict over foreign policy, members of a coalition might as

well disagree over the appropriate role conception to be pursued by their country in the first place (Brummer and Thies, 2015). Future research could thus examine the extent to which national role conceptions are a source of intra-coalition agreement or conflict over foreign policy. In any case, pursuing some of these lines of inquiry appear to hold significant promise in furthering our understanding of coalition governance in foreign policy.

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Table 1: Types of Coalition Arrangements for Foreign Policy

	Which coalition partner holds the foreign ministry?		
How much policy discretion does the foreign minister have?		SENIOR PARTNER	JUNIOR PARTNER
	MINISTERIAL GOVERNMENT	Type 1: Minimal junior partner influence Little or no difference to single-party government	Type 2: 'Issue ownership' and 'hijacking' of junior partner More extreme coalition foreign policy
	CABINET GOVERNMENT	Type 3: Constraining influence of junior partner on coalition foreign policy More moderate coalition foreign policy	Type 4: Only limited scope for junior partner 'issue ownership' and 'hijacking' Coalition foreign policy particularly susceptible to deadlock